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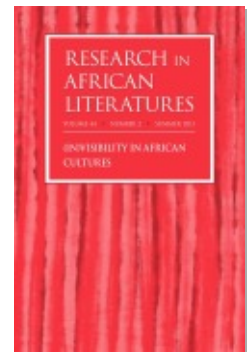
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Chris Abani and the Politics of Ambivalence

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ABSTRACT

In his 2004 novel *GraceLand*, Chris Abani unsettles notions of youth “empowerment,” or “resistance,” creating a restless oscillation between cynicism and idealism. On the one hand, pervasive violence and restricting norms seem to debilitate the novel’s characters, leaving little room to negotiate the constraints of their bleak lives in the slums of Lagos. On the other, there is a certain euphoric optimism that pervades the novel—particularly among youth—which is undergirded primarily by idealized non-African spaces. The persistent fluctuation between suffocating violence and utopian thoughts of the “outside” renders the politics of *GraceLand* fundamentally ambiguous. In lieu of a rigidly determinate portrayal, Abani deploys ambivalence as a discursive vehicle with which to expand the contours of how we come to *think* and *imagine* African youth resistance—pressing us to consider the inherent contradictions, complicities and contingencies that perhaps accompany any ascription of agency.

Like much of his prose and verse, Chris Abani’s novel *GraceLand* fuses the aesthetic and the political. He inserts his own narrative into the nation’s fraught historical metanarratives of civil war, political violence and severe socioeconomic inequality. For Abani, the private, quotidian struggles of *GraceLand*’s fictional characters are inseparable from the broader political turmoil that ravaged the nation during the novel’s historical period. Indeed, Fredric Jameson’s

assertion that “Third World” literatures ought to be read as national allegories holds true for much of Abani’s work, as well as much recent Nigerian anglophone fiction (“Third-World Literature”). Works such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) and Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* (2003) share similar visions of the modern Nigerian nation. Analogous to these contemporary texts, *GraceLand* is simultaneously a reading of Nigeria’s violent history as well as a distinctly aesthetic creation rich in vivid imagery and evocative language.

Abani’s fusion of the aesthetic and the political undergirds the most distinctive feature of *GraceLand*—ambivalence. His depictions of character “resistance” lack a sustained consistency, creating a restless oscillation between cynicism and idealism. On the one hand, violence and restricting norms seem to debilitate the novel’s characters, leaving little room to negotiate the constraints of their bleak lives in the slums of Lagos. On the other, there is a certain euphoric optimism that pervades the novel that is undergirded primarily by idealized non-African spaces. Youth, in particular, are Abani’s primary subjects who navigate this volatile tension between debilitating constraint and euphoric optimism.¹ The persistent fluctuation between suffocating violence and idealistic thoughts of the “outside” renders the politics of *GraceLand* fundamentally ambiguous.

Unpacking both the precarious lives of Abani’s youth characters as well as the “euphoria-of-the-outside” that they create is critical to unraveling Abani’s vacillating politics. Do his depictions and allegories of brutal state repression render his subjects hopelessly trapped in the throes of poverty and violence? Or, does the idea and cultural capital of America and other external spaces allot *GraceLand*’s youth characters a sense of agency and possibility? While these conclusions may in fact contradict one another, their cross-pollination is paradoxically the novel’s greatest feat. What makes Chris Abani’s novel *GraceLand* discursively adroit is his ability to critically engage the (im)possibility of youth resistance in urban African spaces through a vivid narration of precarious lives and the ubiquity of global consumer culture.

FRACTURED WORLD

Violence in *GraceLand* is presented as a cancer that pervades every layer of Nigerian society. Abani’s depictions of decay in the text seem to allegorically allude to the omnipresent depiction of state-sponsored repression. Echoing the state’s political violence that terrorizes society, he creates spatial allegories of urban dilapidation, domestic allegories of familial violence and even bodily allegories of physical and psychological deterioration. These ubiquitous layers of violence constitute the terrain upon which the characters in *GraceLand* navigate and the core of their precarious existence.²

In addition to functioning as the most conspicuous threat to the novel’s characters, Abani’s fierce depiction of state-sponsored violence is his primary means of historically grounding the text. Commencing each chapter with a particular year (ranging from 1972 to 1983), Abani deliberately sets the plot just two years removed from the nation’s harrowing civil war (1967–1970). The memory of the war, therefore, surfaces on several occasions. In one such instance, a young boy recalls his experience as a child soldier when he witnessed the post-massacre scene of a church congregation: “They were mostly women, some men and even

a few children. Some of them had been shot; others had been hacked to death with machetes. A few had been clubbed" (209). Between this recurring residue of the civil war and the political violence that pervades the quotidian experiences in *GraceLand*, Abani underscores the ways in which the Nigerian sovereign has historically coerced and established control of the populace through a political culture of violence and intimidation.³ Abani's vivid portrayal of torture in a military prison further establishes this emphasis: "He felt himself being lifted and dragged roughly, then strapped to a chair, the rope cutting into his wrists, knees and ankles. Someone was slapping him roughly. . . . A soldier stood in front of him, urinating into his face" (294). The state's coercive presence constantly bears down on *GraceLand's* characters, further constraining their already precarious lives.

The most ubiquitous allegory of this pervasive state violence is the novel's decayed urban landscape. Aside from several scattered chapters that take place in the smaller city of Afikpo, the majority of the novel is set in Lagos—specifically Maroko, one of the city's infamous slums. Maroko is introduced as a tightly packed shantytown built on top of a swamp with labyrinthine wooden walkways suspended over stale water. In a keen observation of his surrounding topography, Elvis, the novel's protagonist, expresses his dismay at the "crumbling walls . . . puddles of putrefying water and piss and garlands of dead rats" (121). This depiction of Maroko is remarkably similar to Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman's characterization of Yaoundé (Cameroon) as a landscape of "general decomposition," with "overrunning vegetation," "masses of rubbish," and roads in "total disrepair" ("Figures of the Subject"). Ad hoc sidewalks, heaps of festering garbage, decrepit housing structures, human corpses abandoned in the road after being hit in traffic—all are central features of Abani's urban dystopia as well as Mbembe and Roitman's landscape of "crisis." Elvis and his counterparts in *GraceLand* are literally surrounded by a crumbling and decaying material world.

Moving from a spatial allegory to a domestic allegory, we find that *GraceLand's* political culture of violence finds its parallels in the community and the home. Abani vividly describes a man who is tied up, pelted with stones and burned to death by market workers who accuse of him of petty theft. "It was impossible to see his limbs," Elvis says of the burning man. "He looked like a floating sheet of flame" (227). Added to this neighborhood brutality are the instances in which Elvis and his cousin are raped as young children and the scenes where Elvis's father resorts to acts of drunken violence. To further ingrain the violence and precariousness that pervades society, Abani's canvas of societal violence and decay extends to neighborly hostility and fractious familial relations.

The final allegorical dimension to Abani's depicted fractured world is the corporeal and psychological decay of several characters. As Elvis's father, Sunday, increasingly indulges in palm wine, he seems to be perpetually drunk, angry and "mad." With the bulldozer standing right before him waiting to demolish all of Maroko, Sunday hallucinates and is crushed and left to rot in Maroko's rubble: "Grabbing a cutlass . . . Sunday sprang with a roar . . . and fell in a slump before the 'dozer, its metal threads cracking his chest like a timber box" (287). Similar to Sunday's mental and physical decay, Elvis's mother is described as having terminal cancer that viciously spreads throughout her body until she ultimately passes away. From the state's all-encompassing violence to the decayed landscape, the disquieting social relations, and finally, to this deterioration of the body and

mind, every political, social and spatial layer of the novel is rendered perilous. This fractured world—with its systemic violence, socioeconomic marginalization, and decay—shapes and constrains the lives of Abani's youth subjects. Out of this utterly precarious setting Elvis Oke and his cohort emerge. They desperately seek to navigate their way out of their shattered surroundings. From this bleak life, the youth in *GraceLand* turn to Elvis Presley, Bazooka chewing gum and Coca Cola as their path out of dystopia.

EUPHORIA-OF-THE-OUTSIDE

The idealistic escape from precarious life that the novel's youth create is shaped by the idea of non-African spaces and their cultural capital. America reins supreme in this fabrication with its pop icons and the everyday commodities available throughout Nigeria. While India's colorful Bollywood cinema and clothing are also represented in this affect that I call the "euphoria-of-the-outside," the "idea of America" is situated above all other non-African spaces because of the sense of appropriated social distinction that it confers on youth in the novel. India (via Bollywood) may provide them with a distant imaginary space to which to psychologically withdraw, but the US provides both the affective distraction as well as a Bourdieuan symbolic appropriation of a higher social condition (Bourdieu 271–91). To be sure, Abani avoids the reductive dichotomy of extreme poverty and an externally shaped imaginary. Ibo tradition and Nigerian popular culture are also invoked by his characters in order to withstand tribulation (e.g., Ibo rites of manhood, Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Basi and Company*). However, it is unequivocal that the euphoria of external spaces provides a far more heightened sense of escape for his youth characters. The youth's ability to create this imaginary and even appropriate a limited amount of non-African material culture presupposes a particular historical and socioeconomic setting. Since Abani is so conscious of the historical moment of *GraceLand*, an examination of the infrastructural elements of Nigerian society during the period of the novel reveals the preconditions and possibility of the youth's superstructural imaginary.

The youth's appropriation of the cultural capital of non-African spaces presupposes Nigeria's sharp economic growth and mass influx of imported commodities during the 1970s. Although Nigeria was still grappling with the crippling effects of civil war, the state's ability to accelerate the production of its seemingly bottomless oil reserves allowed the economy to grow exponentially in the first few years of the decade. This newfound capital was accompanied by a wave of imported luxury goods and technology from around the world (Toyin, *History of Nigeria* 137–50). Despite the vastly uneven societal distribution of oil revenues, the nation was soaring high on a "dramaturgy of appearances and representations" so as to match this "new prosperity with visible evidence" (Apter 42). However, as quickly as the oil boom and lavish spectacle of culture seemed to come, economic growth seemed to wither away. By 1976, the economy began to wane due to the instability of oil's rate of profit. Nigeria's "monocrop" economy necessitated its dependence on imported goods since the state neglected to attend to the sustainability of other national industries, notably the agricultural sector. Since the state's revenue did not derive from taxes, but from the royalties paid by foreign oil companies to extract oil, the state was not held accountable to the populace, and

thus, felt no obligation to create social welfare programs to aid the rural and urban poor. The gap between rich and poor, therefore, became severely exacerbated. The result, as the nation moved toward the 1980s, was a crumbling economy heavily indebted to foreign powers, utter dependence on imports for food and other daily goods and repeated military coups seeking to capture the spoils of petroleum (Falola, *History of Nigeria* 137–50; Apter 232; Anda).

GraceLand's Elvis Oke and his cohort fit into this schema as part of the Nigerian populace that received little or no benefits during the oil "boom" and part of those hardest hit when the oil economy went "bust." The youth's condition in *GraceLand* is therefore paradoxical: despite their marginality and limited access to non-African cultural capital, they nonetheless create a euphoric imaginary with what little they possess. The youth in *GraceLand* latch on to the *residue* of cultural capital from both America and India, though primarily the former. Whereas Raymond Williams's largely temporal notion of the cultural residue pertains to that which was "formed in the past, but is still active in the cultural process . . . as an effective element of the present" (Williams 121–27), it is necessary to rethink the residue in the context of *GraceLand* as a part of a system of global markets and transnational exchange. This reformulated "global cultural residue," then, encompasses both the (relatively) cheap imported commodities that filter throughout all strata of Nigerian society (e.g., Coca Cola, American cosmetics) and the outdated cultural capital that is generally considered *démodé* in the producing society, but in *vogue* in the consuming society. Williams's temporal emphasis remains present, but the added dimensions of transnational circulation and low-cost commodity dissemination bring the "residue" closer to our late-capitalist present.

While Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation is also viewed by many today as outmoded, it can nonetheless help articulate the youth's engagement with non-African cultural capital.⁴ Althusser's well-known example is, of course, the policeman who "hails" or "interpellates" the person on the street: "Hey, you there!" The interpellated person becomes a subject (of the law) when she responds—when the addressee responds to the addressor. The interpellation brings the person into subjecthood and establishes control and compliance with the law (110–16). In an important revision of Althusser's conception, Judith Butler argues that the notion of interpellation must take into account the way in which the addressee's "conscience" is conditioned to "turn around" even before the hail of the law. The conscience of the addressee is predicated upon a "prior desire for the law, a compassionate complicity with the law, without which no subject can exist" ("Conscience Doth Make Subjects" 108). Elsewhere, Butler writes that the full range of disobedience—from refusal to subversion, hyperbole to rearticulation—must be considered beyond the subject's putatively inevitable compliance (*Bodies That Matter* 121–24).⁵ In short, the unilateralist basis of Althusser's model must be radically questioned. Butler's recasting is crucial for this investigation of youth in *GraceLand*, since they are by no means passive subjects onto which the interpellation of non-African capital is imposed. The youth's anticipation and rearticulation of global consumer culture's "hail" must be considered.

The crux of the youth's imaginary of non-African spaces is thus a dialogical relation between the capitalist interpellation of youth and the youth's willful citation of the interpellation.⁶ American and Indian films, music and commodities interpellate Elvis and his friends, establishing them as consumers ("subjects") of

global cultural capital; conversely, Abani's youth anticipate the interpellation and reconfigure these cultural items to construct their imaginary sphere. The constitution of the youth's "euphoria-of-the-outside" marks the nexus in which these two mutually dependent and sustaining forces—interpellation and citation—are negotiated.⁷

This phenomenon is best explained with an illustration of the novel's primary American influence: Elvis Oke's impersonation of Elvis Presley. The Presley trope interpellates Elvis in several ways. His mother, who loved the real Elvis's music and dancing, names him after Presley; Elvis sees a Presley impersonator performing for American tourists in Lagos and is inspired to do the same; and the music of the real Elvis, as it is released from the speaker of his record player, interpellates Elvis. His interpellation establishes him as a consumer ("subject") of American cultural capital.

What must be critically underscored is that Elvis does not simply mimic Presley's movements and aesthetic. Whether he is cognizant of it or not, Elvis reconfigures the Presley aesthetic in accordance with his needs and desires. Alone in his bedroom, Elvis turns his record player to "Heartbreak Hotel" and assembles his look. He whitens his skin with "Saturday Night talc" and puts on dark mascara and shiny red lipstick. He honestly believes that the real Elvis dressed in this way. He laments that he cannot be seen in public like this, since such habits are reserved for the "transvestites that haunted the car parks of hotels." He would surely be beaten and the "target of some insult" if he did (76–78). This scene is particularly intriguing because Elvis (apparently unconsciously) morphs the image of the real Elvis to fit his desire to obscure gender distinctions. He employs and manipulates the Presley trope in order to circumvent the constraints of heteronormativity.

The preparation and performance of Elvis's queered Presley aesthetic represents the central feature of his personal euphoria-of-the-outside. Looking at the image of a white couple on his can of "Saturday Night talc," Elvis thinks, "That [is] the life." While he tries to evenly spread the talcum power over his face, the omniscient narrator notes, "His earlier worries slipped away." These "earlier worries" refer to his dismissal from his job as a laborer that day. Immersing himself in his own version of the Elvis Presley aesthetic lifts his mind away from the precarious thought of unemployment as well as the daily threat of violence.

Another instance of cultural reconfiguration and mobilization in *GraceLand* is the scene of an impromptu film viewing in an abandoned car park. Abani intimates that poor and working class people find a "release" in their experience of these old American films. Despite the flimsy makeshift screen and archaic projector, Abani describes the crowd's experience of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* as "magical." Since most of the crowd is illiterate and unable to read the subtitles, they create their own story lines or listen to the projection operator who screams out his own outlandish accompanying narrative that fuses Indian Bollywood and American Hollywood tropes. The crowd's euphoric reworking of these old American films seems to stand in deliberate counterpoint to the novel's ubiquitous depictions of violence.

The youth at this showing of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* exhibit a far more heightened sense of escape than the others present. This is indeed a moment in the novel when the generational lines are starkly drawn. Elvis and his friends analyze the film's characters according to their lives and struggles in Lagos—transposing

Clint Eastwood to their Lagosian immediate present. They also “try out the conversations” from the film, employing their own versions of the “exotic” American English accent. Phrases such as “Darn these here rustlers” and “Shuh likes you, Annie” often seem to have little relevance to their own conversations, but the Americanness nevertheless exhilarates them: “There was a power in the words that elevated them, made them part of something bigger” (150). These youth derive a sense of social distinction from their rearticulations of these American images and sounds, which “elevates” them into a euphoric space that centers on the “idea of America.”

Aside from the films of Clint Eastwood and John Wayne, what further constitutes this “idea of America” are the commodities and music that disseminate throughout society. From American cigarettes to the cartoons written on Bazooka bubble gum wrappers, the youth appropriate what little material culture they can in order to construct their escapist idea of the US. The music of Al Green and Donna Summer is also a constant thread in the novel that contributes to the euphoric escape. These material and aural forms of American cultural capital give the youth in *GraceLand* the impression that the US is “where dreams come true” (26).⁸ However, this “idea of America” begs a critical question: to what degree does this euphoric imaginary empower—or, indeed *disempower*—youth in *GraceLand*? Does the utopian “idea of America” provide youth with a sense of possible agency? Does it repress, instead of contest, the constraints of daily life?

INDETERMINATE AGENTS

Abani’s depiction of agency in *GraceLand* is hardly evident or cohesive. In some chapters, his characters convey an empowering vision of escape to America; in others, they are clearly beaten down by the ubiquity of violence and socioeconomic constraint. However, Abani’s apparent equivocation about agency represents the novel’s greatest strength. He presents the ambivalences and indeterminations of the youth experience in an effort to problematize the possibility of resistance.

One pervasive constraint in the novel that exemplifies this ambivalent resistance is social normativity. The ways in which social norms shape and restrict lives is most apparent with Elvis and his interactions with others. Elvis expresses a desire to live beyond the confines of restricting norms, yet he is frequently (dis)abused by others when he tries to “break out.” Moreover, when he does seek to “transgress” social norms, it frequently remains unclear as to whether he actually “subverts” the norm or if he is unintentionally complicit in the perpetuation of the norm. As a small child, for instance, Elvis convinces his aunts to dress him in women’s clothes and let him wear makeup—something he had longed to do. When Sunday sees Elvis, he beats Elvis and shaves his head so that it cannot be made in a “feminine way.” “No son of mine is going to grow up as a homosexual!” Sunday exclaims (62). Elvis’s desire to contest and “negotiate” with inhibiting normative codes is met with Sunday’s staunch effort to uphold those codes so as to avoid the anxieties of public transgression.

This scene brings to light a critical ambivalence related to gender and agency in the novel. Elvis’s desire to wear women’s clothing as well as Elvis’s queered “Presley aesthetic” discussed earlier exhibit his intention to blur gender lines. However, neither of these acts should be assumed to be subversive, as much as

they may complicate social norms. As Butler explains with regard to drag, such acts “may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms.”⁹ In other words, the “female” and “male” gendered elements of Elvis’s actions could very well reinforce heteronormative gender formations while simultaneously undermining the “naturalness” of these same formations. Such would be the case if, say, Elvis’s eye shadow and lipstick were applied in a deliberate “heteronormatively female” manner, even if he sought to contest the “heteronormative” in some way. Since Elvis’s gendered identity surfaces explicitly only twice in the novel, it seems futile to claim that he either upholds or undermines heteronormativity. This leads us to a critical question concerning Abani’s decision to portray the subtleties of an ambivalently gendered protagonist. How might this gender ambivalence effect *GraceLand*’s broader ambivalent articulations of youth resistance?

If we were to claim that Elvis’s gender-blurring actions partially subvert heteronorms (which is certainly debatable), might this in-and-of itself be considered an empowering act? Abani’s ambiguous depictions again foreclose the possibility of any clear explication. On the one hand, Elvis has the audacity to break stigmatizing norms by wearing make up and resembling what he calls a “transvestite.” On the other, he does not leave the isolation of his bedroom when acting out his queer Presley aesthetic; his actions are demonstrated to no one but himself. A similar ambiguously isolationist scene takes place in a deserted Anglican church where Elvis and his three friends hump each other—imitating the men they had seen having sex in American “blue films.” Three of the boys lay out the normative line, stating, “Dat is homo. It is taboo, forbidden.” The fourth, Obed, contests the stigma by saying, “It must be alright because dey do it in de movies” (196–97). Obed’s film citation effectively destigmatizes the act, if only transiently. After convincing each other that they are in total isolation and that no one will enter the church, the boys strip down to their underwear and proceed to hump one another.

Like Elvis’s blurring of gender norms in the privacy of his bedroom, these boys’ bold act of imitating gay sex occurs in isolation. Is this scene to be read as the youth generation’s nascent reduction of inhibiting social norms? Or, are Elvis and his friends merely reinforcing the stigmatizing normative by isolating their transgression? What seems evident in these instances of isolationist transgression is that the youth’s citation of non-African cultural capital (Presley, American “blue films”) should not be assumed to be an overdetermined act of resistance. The crucial point is not merely that the interpellation is cited and rearticulated, but precisely how the rearticulated interpellation is *mobilized*. What is done with the rearticulation is what matters—not the simple fact that the rearticulation took place. Looking at the ways in which Elvis and his friends mobilize the American interpellation, their ascribed agency is presented as fundamentally indeterminate.

A further instance of ambivalent agency in *GraceLand* is a phenomenon resembling passive rebellion. This is notably exhibited in the “confrontational nicknames” that youth take on. Names such as “Redemption,” “Confusion,” and “Able-to-do” are ways of “defying a culture where your name [is] selected with care by your family and given to you as a talisman.” To the young Elvis, these names are “the thing rebellion [is] made of” (147). As forms of passive rebellion, these names invoke a symbolic affect of rebellion in lieu of a defiant, change-inducing act. The question here concerns the distinction between the *idea* of resistance

and the *concrete act* of resistance. Along with the utterance of the reconfigured or “re-signified” name is the implication that the *affect* of a recasted identity alters one’s perception of her social or material environment. Can something that we “perceive” or “imagine” be considered a form of resistance, as opposed to an event that produces palpable change? Is it even possible to distinguish between “agency as thought” and “agency as lived experience?” This is yet another layer to Abani’s ambivalent depiction of youth agency in the novel. Abani effectively obfuscates the distinction between that which is thought and that which is tangibly enacted.

The blurring of enacted resistance and the idea of resistance again comes to the fore in the youth’s idyllic conception of the United States. The idealism of social and material uplift is constructed around the idea of America as a destination where one achieves fame, wealth and even “redemption.” As such, the youth’s utopian image of America seems to be accompanied by a belief that American cultural capital can provide one with a sense of “agency” or “empowerment.” As if the more American cultural capital youth acquire, the closer they come to making this utopian idea their own “lived experience,” thus escaping from their precarious Lagosian lives. This materially induced idealism is evident in one scene in which Elvis consults his American bubble gum wrappers for advice while he is chased by the military. Reading the fortune on a Bazooka gum wrapper, Elvis “desperately seek[s] words of wisdom” to guide him through his precarious circumstance (240). Elvis hopes the American commodity will instruct him how to act and negotiate his immediate predicament. Despite not finding what he seeks in the gum wrappers, Elvis’s belief in the power of American cultural capital remains intact.

The idealist conception of America increases significantly when it is thought of as a physical location to which to relocate. Redemption and Elvis believe that wealth and fame are attainable instantaneously in America for film actors and dancers—their desired professions. Moreover, by the end of the novel, America’s reputation is solidified as the safe alternative to the chaos of Lagos. With this physical space of America in mind, one single material item is presented as the source of the most potential agency: an American visa. Coveted by Redemption and affixed in his passport, this piece of paper represents the idealistic escape. The implication is that escape to America signifies not only a horizontal mobility across space, but also an idealistic upward mobility in perceived social position (Bourdieu 145–46).

What renders the final page of the novel so captivating is the ambiguity of Elvis’s departure and Abani’s implicit critique of the escape. In the final sequence, Elvis is waiting for his plane to the US, where he hopes to live with his aunt. Redemption has given his visa and passport to Elvis, since he believes Elvis to be far more vulnerable in Lagos than any one else. As he is traveling with Redemption’s passport, Elvis initially does not respond when a flight attendant calls the name “Redemption” for the final boarding call. When the attendant calls the name even louder a second time, Elvis responds, “Yes, this is redemption” (321).

As farcical as it sounds, the implication taken from a *prima facie* reading of this closing sequence seems to be that America is somehow the “savior” of the world’s destitute. However, with a closer reading, it seems that perhaps this is an implicit critique of the belief that America can “redeem” the precarious lives of the “periphery.” This muted critique is further convoluted by other ambivalences. Who exactly is redeeming whom? Is it Redemption who saves Elvis by giving him the

visa? Is America Elvis's "savior," as if it were some sort of neocolonial missionary that "saves" Africans from their "unenlightened" lives? We also do not even know if Elvis in fact leaves Lagos. The novel's final line is Elvis responding, "Yes, this is Redemption" while in the Lagos airport.

Considering all of these scenarios, the idea of Elvis's final statement and migration seems utterly confounding. The ambivalent portrayal of Elvis's departure gives the impression that his "empowering escape" will be just as contingent as any attempt at agency in Nigeria. Are we really to believe that Elvis's tribulations will end with his migration to the US? If the migration novels of other recent African writers are any indication (e.g., Fatou Diome's *Le ventre de l'Atlantique*, Alain Mabanckou's *Bleu-blanc-rouge*), then we can posit that life in the US will hardly lack precariousness for Elvis.

The apparent critical ending to *GraceLand* provides anything but clarity. Questions and ambivalences about the notion of agency in the novel are left unsettled. Paradoxically, it is this presence of contradictory depictions of resistance that makes Abani's text an indispensable contribution to contemporary African prose. He does not simply provide a rigidly determinate portrayal of the African youth experience. Instead, he deploys ambivalence as a discursive vehicle with which to expand the contours of how we come to *think* and *imagine* the notion of youth resistance.

THE POLITICS OF AMBIVALENCE

In the various interviews and speeches that Chris Abani has given in the last decade, he has consistently used the word "transformation" to describe the intention of his artistic practice. He uses the term as a part of a larger dialectic in which "transformation" is set in opposition to the "darkest things about us" and our "complete vulnerability." In a speech given in Arusha, Tanzania at TED Global 2007, Abani stated, "I am asking us to balance the idea of our complete vulnerability with a complete transformation of the notion of what is possible." Similarly, at TED 2008, Abani stated that his intention is to portray "transformation . . . [but] never look away from the darkest things about us" ("Chris Abani on the stories of Africa"; "Chris Abani muses on humanity").

These statements seem to be purposely elliptical. Abani never clearly articulates what he means by "transformation." Since it is juxtaposed against notions of "darkness" and "vulnerability," the implication is that transformation is somehow a form of enlightenment or overcoming of constraint. The word "possible" is also left dangling, seemingly referring to the potentiality of new modes of thought or lived praxis. "Transformation" implies a movement away from something, yet also an inextricable linkage to the *ur*-form prior to transformation. Likewise, the "possible" implies an opposition to the "impossible," yet also an inseparable connection to the impossible. Abani's works blur the distinction between the possible and the impossible, the transformed and the untransformed. While he searches for the "complete transformation of the possible," he paradoxically questions the possibility of "complete transformation." He posits that the transformed or enlightened shape—in its putatively transcendent form—always looks back. The transcendent can never be unmoored from its originary "darkness" or "vulnerability."

GraceLand's Elvis is the embodiment of this (im)possibility of transformation. His escape into a "mythology of America" lifts him from his precarious life, but as one might expect, that precarious life never altogether dissipates. When it seems that Elvis will be "transformed" by his imminent physical escape to America, we can hardly believe that his precarious life—his "darkness" and "vulnerability"—will be left behind. Instead, it seems that Elvis will always retain traces of his harrowed life once lived. For Abani, violence bleeds into the transformed and vulnerability blurs into enlightenment.

What makes *GraceLand* politically resonant is the ambivalence of Abani's narrative, not merely his explicit critiques of military repression or geopolitical inequity. His ambiguous sketches of African youth agency—and indeed, human agency broadly construed—are his greatest contributions to contemporary thought. Literature that produces vexed implications has far more political import than that which is read as rigidly determinate. Abani simultaneously expands and unsettles our understanding of the notion of agency, pressing us to consider the inherent contradictions, complicities, and contingencies that perhaps accompany any ascription of resistance.

NOTES

1. At times, there seems to be a sense of idealism driving the actions of older characters in *GraceLand* (e.g., King of the Beggars' political activism, Sunday's community leadership). However, the focus of this essay largely concerns the particular formation, maintenance, and geopolitics of *youth* idealism, which is arguably distinct in the novel in terms of both its intensity and the primacy of non-African spaces in its constitution.

2. My consideration of precarious life and space is indebted to Judith Butler's discussion of the term in relation to Levinas, alterity, and the ethics of nonviolence. However, this examination is largely confined to the events and depictions of Abani's text. See Butler, *Precarious Life*.

3. This is akin to Achille Mbembe's notion of the *commandement* in the postcolony. See Mbembe, "The Banality of Power."

4. For a discussion of this putative obsolescence, see Jameson, *Postmodernism* 345–46.

5. See also Stuart Hall's discussion of subversion and interpellation in "The Problem of Ideology" 30–31.

6. In contrast to Derrida's notion of the performative citation that presupposes "cette absence essentielle de l'intention à l'actualité de l'énoncé" 'this absence of the intention of the actuality of utterance,' I use the term "citation" to articulate the way in which youth in *GraceLand* intentionally "cite" the cultural capital of non-African spaces, thereby actively negotiating with the interpellation that bears down on them. See Derrida 387–90.

7. For a discussion, from the perspective of political economy, on the way in which metropolitan cultural capital is engaged in African nations, see Mensah.

8. In a 2004 radio interview, Abani historically grounds this "idea of America," stating that *GraceLand* is set in an epoch during which Nigeria was "inundated with American mythology." See Abani, "Chris Abani in Conversation with Richard Wolinsky."

9. Butler's claim is particularly relevant since there seems to be a certain indistinguishability between drag and cross-dressing in the novel. Elvis's Presley aesthetic implies a drag-like "performance" of his gender-blurred persona while his dressing up

in his aunt's clothing intimates merely a desire to embody a cross-gendered appearance. See *Bodies That Matter* 125.

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